

# The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

BULLETIN EIGHTY-NINE

THE PROGGER by Gilbert Byron

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines a progger as: "one who makes a livelihood by oystering, digging clams, or the like, in a small way, or by doing odd jobs alongshore; hence, a shiftless, worthless fellow."

This is a shabby definition for the breed who are survivors of the early trail-blazers, trappers, and market-hunters — men molded out of the same marsh mud as Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett.

Today's proggers live the free and simple life that Henry Thoreau experimented with beside Walden Pond. The progger may be shiftless in material matters, but he is not shiftless with the freedom that is our country's greatest promise. And without ever using the word, he is a philosopher.

The men of the Concord River were molded in this same pattern and so was Henry Thoreau. But Thoreau was a progger with a college education. He listened to the tall tales and reported to his journal in 1854:

"Sept. 8.P.M. . . . Talked with Garfield, who was fishing off his shore . . . He says the two turtles, of one of which I have the shell, weighed together eighty-nine pounds . . . Once, he and another man were digging a ditch in a meadow in Waltham . . . They found two mud turtles three feet beneath the surface and no hole visible by which they entered."

How to catch a turtle was a favorite topic of conversation among the men of the Concord River. Haynes told Thoreau that "he used to catch mud turtles in the ponds behind Provincetown with a toad on a mackerel hook thrown into the pond and the line tied to a stump or stake on the shore. Invariably the turtle when hooked crawled up, following the line to the stake and was there found waiting."

Henry used a simpler method. On May 16, 1854, he wrote in his journal:

"On Hubbard's meadow, saw a motion in the water as if a pickerel had darted away; approached and saw a middlesized snapping turtle on the bottom; managed at last, after stripping off my coat and rolling up my shirt-sleeves by thrusting in my arm to the shoulder, to get him by the tail and lift him aboard. He tried to get under the boat. He snapped at my shoe and got the toe in his mouth."

Thoreau attempted to make friends with the monster. He scratched the turtle's back but to little avail. He concluded: "Nature does not forget beauty of outline even in a mud turtle's shell."

Henry was seldom without a ball of twine and fish hooks. The fish he caught were often his main dish. In April 1844, Edward Hoar, son of Concord's

The Thoreau Society, Inc. is an informal gathering of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Roland Robbins, Lincoln, Mass., president; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, State University College, Geneseo, New York, secretary-treasurer. Membership: \$2.00 a year; life membership, \$25.00.

FALL, 1964

leading citizen, joined Thoreau for a day's excursion on the Sudbury River. They caught fish and built a fire in a stump to cook them. But the woods were dry, and a sudden gust of wind spread the fire beyond their control. Before it was extinguished, one hundred acres of woodland were destroyed. One of the firefighters called Thoreau, "a damned rascal."

With the progger, Thoreau loved solitude and disliked the assembled throngs. He reported that solitude strengthened him while society encouraged weakness. On his way home in the twilight after a day on the river, he observed to his journal: "I smell the smoke of burning meadows. I love the scent. It is my pipe. I smoke the earth." Thoreau closely watched the local proggers. On May 1st, after paddling his boat up the Assabet River to Cedar Swamp, he wrote in his journal:

"I have seen Goodwin and Haynes all day hunting muskrats and ducks, stealthily paddling along the river-side or by the willows and button-bushes, now the river is high, and shooting any rat that may expose himself. . . . One in the stern paddling slowly along, while the other sat with gun ready cocked and the dog erect in the prow, all eyes constantly scanning the surface amid the button-bushes and willows, for the rats are not easy to distinguish from a bunch of dried grass or a stick. Suddenly one is seen resting on his perch, and crack goes the gun, and over goes the dog instantly to fetch him. These men represent a class which probably always exists, even in the most civilized community, and allies it to the most savage."

But the men who killed muskrats also had a tender side. On the last day of May, Thoreau discovered a new kind of flower, the wild azalea, which his sister Sophia had brought home the night before. Where did she get it? He had never seen the azalea on his excursions. Henry learned that George Melvin had brought an armful of the wild-flowers to town on Saturday evening. He had given the azalea away, but he wouldn't tell anyone where he had found the "red honeysuckle."

Thoreau hurried to Melvin's home along the river and found the progger sitting in the shade beside a pail of the wild azaleas. He had even set out a sprig in the earth beside the house. At first Melvin was reticent and wouldn't tell Henry where he found the pink flowers, but he relented and took Thoreau in his boat to the spot where he picked the wild azalea. Henry offered to pay him for the information, but the progger wouldn't take a cent.

On December 2, 1856, the day Thoreau took his



boat out of the river, he saw, as reported in his journal:

"Melvin's lank, bluish-white, black-spotted hound, and Melvin with his gun near, going home at eve. He follows hunting, praise be to him, as regularly in our tame fields as the farmers follow farming. . . I thank my stars for Melvin. I think of him with gratitude when I am going to sleep, grateful that he exists,—that Melvin who is such a trial to his mother. Yet he is agreeable to me as a tinge of russet on the hillside."

The next day he added: "I am not only grateful because Veias, and Homer, and Christ, and Shakespeares have lived, but I am grateful for Minott, and Rice, and Melvin, and Goodwin, and Puffer even. I see Melvin all alone filling his sphere, in russet suit, which no other could fill or suggest. He takes up as much room in nature as the most famous."

Thoreau was celebrating the progress of Concord.



LOOK 5-19-64

"My desperation is quieter than the desperation of any man in the house."

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#### ALLEN FRENCH PAPERS IN THE THOREAU SOCIETY ARCHIVES.

The Thoreau Society is indebted to Miss Maude D. French of Hanover, N.H., Miss Frances S. French of New York City, and Mrs. Evan R. Spalt of Plainfield, N.J., for the gift of papers pertaining to Thoreau from the library of their father, the late Allen French of Concord. Mr. French, one of Concord's most distinguished historians, died on October 6, 1946 (See Bulletin 18). Mr. French was active in the organization of the Thoreau Society in 1941 and served on the executive committee for the remainder of his life.

His Thoreau papers, which have been placed in the Thoreau Society Archives, include the following: Adams, Raymond, "Thoreau Newsletters 1936-1944," "Thoreau at Harvard," "Thoreau's Burials," "Thoreau's Science," "Thoreau and Immortality," "The Stream I Go A-fishing In," Review of Canby's Thoreau, Supplement to Catalog, List of Books on Brook Farm; Allen, Francis, Review of Canby's Thoreau; Blanchard, H.M., "Thoreau's Concord"; Brown, Percy, "Emerson's Debt to Carlyle," "Emerson and Thoreau," Rowfant Society Papers; Emerson, Edward W., Notes on the Underground Railway and the facts concerning Henry Thoreau's connection with it made in 1892 from memory of a talk with old Mrs. Bigelow, Notes on a talk with Staples, Notes by A.F. of talks with E.W.E. on Channing, Emerson's fire, the Blood sisters etc.; French, Allen, Correspondence: Purchase of Thoreau Portrait in Hellman auction with illustrated catalog, The Portrait-Is it genuine?, Notes on Thoreau, Notes on Emerson, Notes on local Thoreau group, 1941 letters on starting the Thoreau Society, 1942 letters, 1943-44 letters, Miscellaneous letters, Clippings most from papers 1933-1944, "Emerson's Poetry"; Causes:

1930, Furniture for Thoreau Room at Antiquarian House; 1936-38, Purchase by C.F.P. Library of Gleason Photos and N.C. Wyeth paintings; 1938, The Texas House; 1943, The Jo Davidson Statue; 1943, The Bean Field; 1946, Location of the Hut and Marking the Site; Haras, Ztiszoltan, The Idyll of Brook Farm; Harding, Walter, "Thoreau in the White Mts"; Hoeltje, Hubert H., "Thoreau in Concord Church and Town," "Emerson, Citizen of Concord"; Hoover, Ira, 1917 Centennial booklet; Keyes, Prescott, 1879, Harvard College Disquisition Thoreau; Hosmer, Alfred W., Chronology 1895; Lee, Harry, Verse life of H.D.T., Call Ye Green Things; Piper, Fred S., Letter about Mrs. Thoreau's Ghost, Memorial Booklet; S.C.D., "A Word on Thoreau"; Thompson, Francis M., Poems, "A Wooded Hill," "Pine Hill"; Boston Society of Natural History, copy of Thoreau letter to; Haldeman-Julius, Condensed Walden; Tomlinson H.M., "Visiting Concord".

#### NOTES AND QUERIES . . . .

The Committee, appointed at the last annual meeting of the Thoreau Society to consider the advisability of a Thoreau Memorial Fund, requests from society members opinions (both for and against) and suggestions as to how such a fund could be used. Please address all communications to the committee chairman, Andrew Lane, 20 Greenleaf Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148.

Your secretary is being sent by the United States Department of State to lecture on Thoreau in various universities in Japan from November 2 to December 17, 1964.

We are indebted to the following for material used in this bulletin: R.Adams, T.Bailey, C.Bode, K.Cameron, E.Englehardt, S.Hosmer, L.Kleinfeld, H. Lambert, V.Munoz, G.Rady, C.Tweedy, L.Tozer, A. Volkman, W.White, R.Wheeler, and J.Wyllie.

On March 12, 1964, five high schools in suburban Cleveland participated in a humanities seminar devoted to Henry David Thoreau and listened to an address by Harry H. Wiggins on "Four Ideals of Thoreau."

Beryl Gilman (234 West 88th St., New York City 24) would like to swap his copy of Bazalgette HENRY THOREAU BACHELOR OF NATURE for a copy of Salt's biography of Thoreau.

Mr. John F. Pontin (Two Oaks, Whitegate, Nr. Chard, Somerset, England) is interested in establishing a branch of the Thoreau Society for the British Isles. Anyone interested in joining should get in touch with him.

The July, 1964 issue of THE GADFLY, a publication of the Great Books Foundation, notes that both the discussion leaders and the participants in their forums found Thoreau one of the most satisfactory authors for discussion purposes.

Francis D. Ross of the University of Colorado, spoke on "Henry David Thoreau: Poet, Historian, Mythologist" at the October, 1963 session of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association. And Marcis Bullard, of the University of New Mexico, spoke on "Imagery in Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience'" at the same meeting.

A post card view of Walden Pond issued recently by the Yankee Colour Corp. of Framingham, Mass. entitles it "The Beach at Walden Pond."

The proposals for a new complete edition of Thoreau's writings, sponsored by the Modern Language Association, are rapidly crystalizing. Formal announcements will soon be forthcoming.